

# Decolonising Prevailing systems of knowledge in international development

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# Agenda

- ◇ Background
- ◇ The system that prevails
- ◇ Efforts to subvert the system and ongoing challenges
- ◇ Some initiatives
  - ◇ *Decolonial Subversions*
  - ◇ Amharic OODE - አርቶዶክሳዊ ትምህርት ደግማ መድረክ
  - ◇ Project dldl/ድልድል



*Routledge Research in Religion and Development*

# **ADAPTING GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT TO LOCAL RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS**

**A DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE  
IN ETHIOPIA**

Romina Istratii

## Decolonising gender and development & public health

- ◇ Critical international development researcher and practitioner with decade-long experience in sub-Saharan Africa working to:
  - ◇ Address the disconnect between gender & development theory and communities' lived experiences
  - ◇ Emphasise the importance of 'linguistic and cosmological' translation in understanding local experiences and issues
  - ◇ Improve understanding of non-western religious worldviews in western epistemology
- ◇ In order to improve the effectiveness of gender-sensitive interventions in religious societies





1st Joint PhD Symposium of the SOAS Research Students' Association  
(RSA) & The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research (SJPR)

## Decolonisation in Praxis

Thursday 07 June 2018, 10am-2pm  
SOAS, Wolfson Lecture Theatre (SWLT)  
Senate House, First Floor (S108)

Decolonising the academic curriculum is a salient discourse in our days in British universities. The School of Oriental and African Studies, an institution that started as a colonial project in 1916, has been steadily moving in this direction, with students increasingly requesting a re-evaluation of curricula that have favoured a single knowledge centre and portrayed a certain (western) epistemology or viewpoint of the world as normative. All this converges to an effort to open up knowledge-making to different epistemologies, normative standards and representations, which fit better an institution

## Decolonising knowledge production & publishing

- ❖ Served as co-Editor of The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research, an open access journal for SOAS students and affiliates
- ❖ Acted as Open Access Champion to raise awareness about material barriers in producing and accessing knowledge led by a Northern-dominated publishing industry
- ❖ Concerned with so-called Open Access publishing models and their implications for global publishing inequalities (Istratii and Demeter 2019; Demeter and Istratii 2020)

**Open Conversations**

**Romina Istratii**  
PhD Student, Department of  
Religions & Philosophies  
Co-Editor of The SOAS Journal of  
Postgraduate Research

0:00 / 5:31



# Applying a Decolonial Lens to Research Structures, Norms and Practices in Higher Education Institutions



## Decolonising research, funding & research development

- ❖ Served as Research Funding Officer and then GCRF Officer in the SOAS Research and Enterprise Directorate
- ❖ Concerned about the changing funding landscape and the role of research offices in research development practices, especially in relation to emerging schemes that fund research related to UK Official Development Assistance (ODA)
- ❖ Conversation event that included 13 presentations by researchers, academics, practitioners, funders and research office directors from the health and social sciences with speakers from the UK and Namibia, Ethiopia and Nepal (Istratii and Lewis 2019), resulting in the Decolonising Research Initiative subsequently

# The system: historical dominance of western epistemology

- ◆ All individuals are “epistemologically situated” (Istratii 2017, 4). Epistemology may be defined as a system of criteria and standards for validating what counts as knowledge, “which is ultimately linked to worldview” (Ladson-Billings 2005, 258).
- ◆ Historically, western epistemology has dominated and this has been embedded in colonial and post-Enlightenment legacies (Fanon 1961; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1986; Quijano 2000; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999; Mignolo and Walsh 2018). International development was built on the legacy of the ‘civilising mission’ (Manji and O’Coill 2002; Rist 2014; Istratii 2020a).
- ◆ This epistemology is underlined by an implicit, but pervasive, western ‘logic’ dictating the production of universal definitions and theories. Theory seen as uninterrogated assumption or *telos* in itself as opposed to as a means to an end informed by context-specific and practical needs (Istratii 2020a)



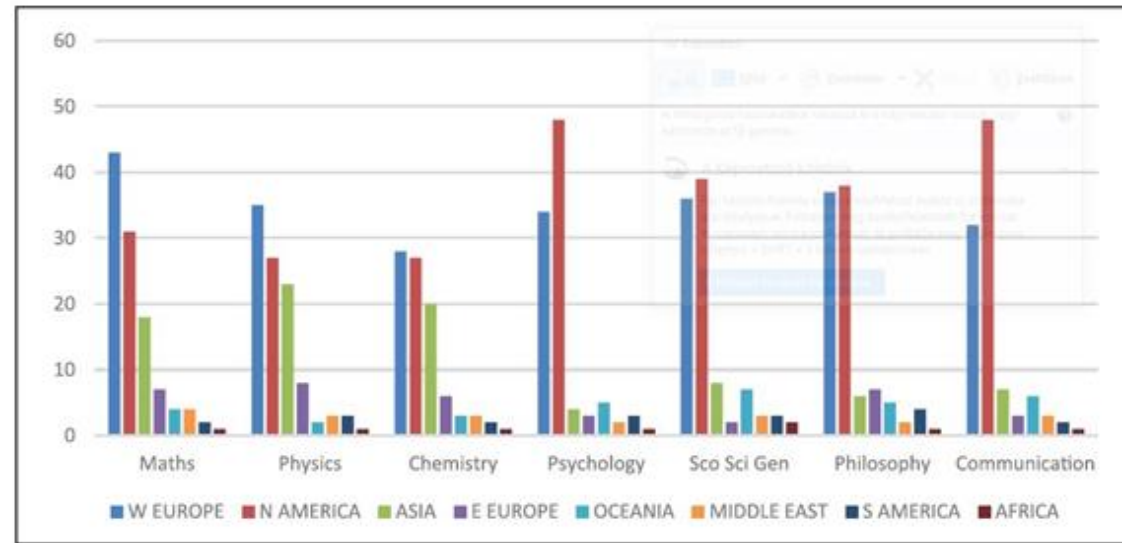
# The system: normative, political and material means of domination

- ◆ Dominance of English language in international development research and practice, which favours Anglophone norms of knowledge production (language and epistemology as interlinked);
- ◆ Western standards and understandings of evidence, capacity building and impact perpetuated through donor and funder priorities, grant management laws and due diligence expectations favouring Northern regulatory frameworks;
- ◆ Political and ideological agendas in international development (e.g. as perpetuated via international agreements and agendas, e.g. SDGs, and through epistemic communities that present themselves as neutral ‘experts’; Istratii 2012), which overall perpetuate Northern priorities in Southern countries and an ‘elusive’ language of development that is largely unrealisable (Istratii 2020b);
- ◆ Geographic distribution of publishing houses, with international development and international politics publications and editorial boards being dominated by Northern researchers and academics (Cummings and Hoebink 2016; Briggs and Weathers 2016).

# Publishing asymmetries

Contribution of world regions in different disciplines from 1975 to 2017, by the affiliation of authors of research articles indexed in SCI/SSCI WoS.

Note: Vertical axis (left) shows the percentage of a given world region. SCI = science fields; SSCI = social science fields; WoS = Web of Science.



Source: Demeter (2019)

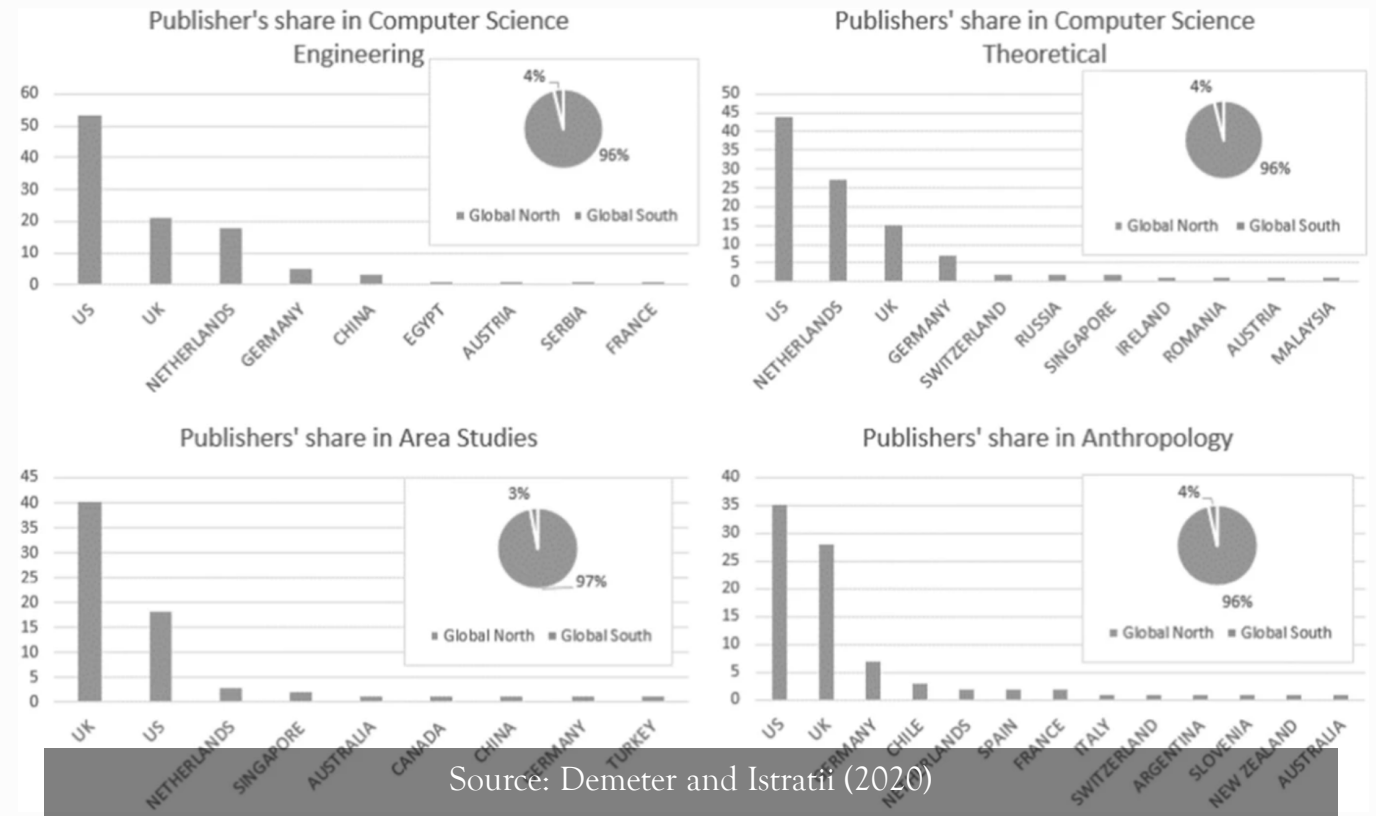


## Global distribution of publishers

The share in world publications for the Global North cumulatively is 96–97 percent.

The less wealthy or peripheral regions are extremely underrepresented in terms of 'high-impact' published research in all the analysed fields.

But there are considerable differences within the centre and across wealthier nations.



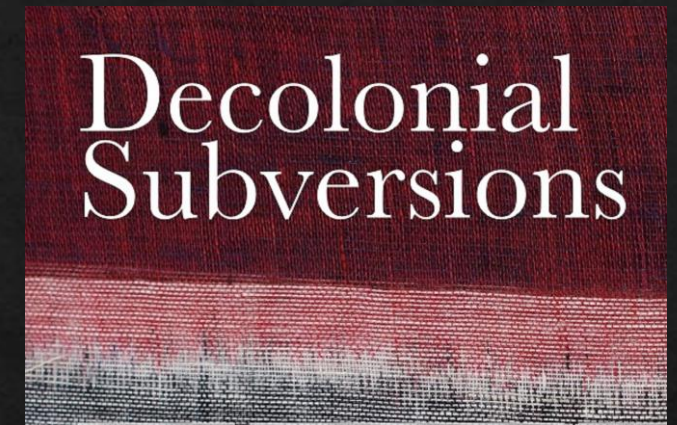
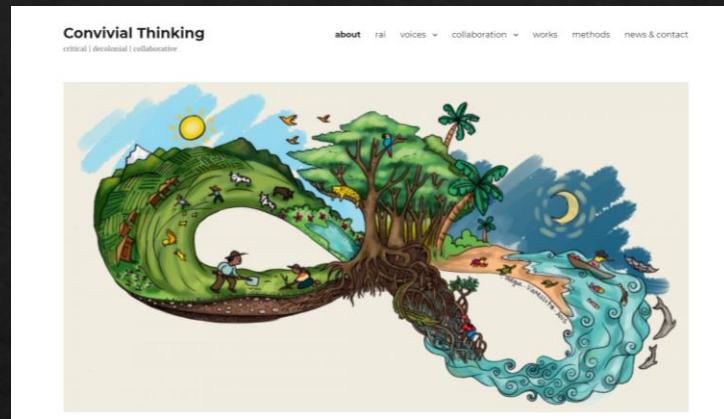
# The outcome

- ◆ Disconnect between theories, frameworks or strategies informing interventions and programmes and communities' own conceptual repertoires and lived experiences.
- ◆ Limited accountability to communities, with most programmes being concerned with serving donor/funder priorities as opposed to achieving impact meaningful to local stakeholders.
- ◆ Neglect of dimensions and aspects of life that might be salient for understanding a certain issue but which are neglected or antagonised in the prevalent paradigms (e.g. religious beliefs and psychological parameters in the study of domestic violence when research and interventions take place in low- and middle-income countries)

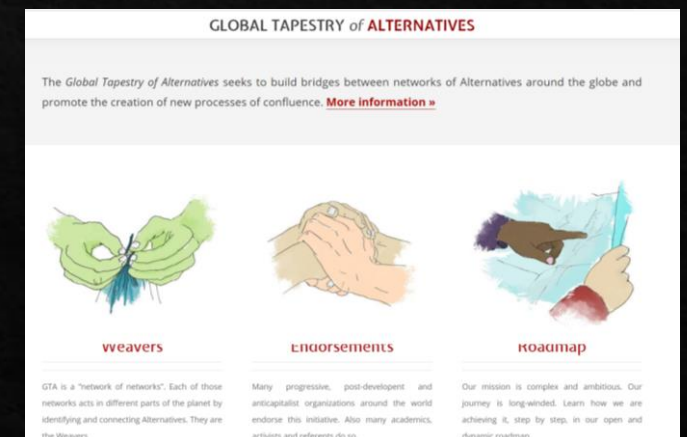
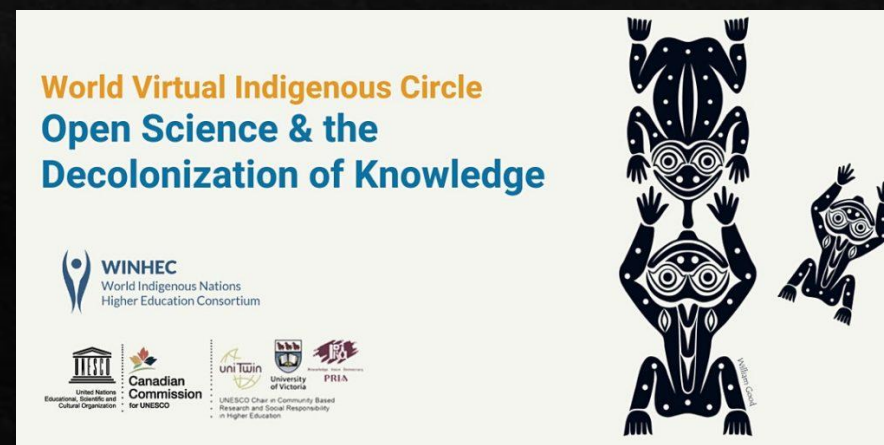


# Decolonisation movements and open 'science' initiatives

- ◆ Active efforts within higher education sector and international development to decolonise knowledge production and research methodologies; efforts to engage substantively with and to cite non-western, indigenous, female and other marginalised voices;
- ◆ Efforts to decolonise research partnerships and to raise awareness around western Euro-centric funding structures and understandings of research excellent and impact; increased awareness of the need for reflexive and dialogical cross-cultural collaborations; Northern funding bodies seeking partnerships with Southern counterparts;
- ◆ New publishing and activist initiatives to overcome material barriers in publishing and knowledge accessibility and to make knowledge more immediately available & diversifying publishing formats (e.g. films, poetry, ethnographic notes, etc.);
- ◆ Efforts to promote indigenous languages in scholarly writing and to connect knowledge production with real communities and societal issues – addressing disconnect between research/knowledge and practical issues.



# Some initiatives working to change the system





# Changing the system

- ◆ Recognising the metaphysics underlying international development paradigms and how these emerged in genealogies of western philosophical thinking.
- ◆ Placing central attention to the process of ‘cosmological and linguistic’ translation and the need for:
  - ◆ Language acquisition and linguistic analysis and interpretation alongside ‘data analysis’
  - ◆ Reflexivity about one’s own worldview and how this informs conceptual frameworks; avoiding concepts not emerging from the ground up and justifying their relevance before applying them
- ◆ Thinking more in terms of community relevance and meaningful impact than donor results and ‘value for money’, which requires:
  - ◆ Researchers and practitioners understanding communities’ own realities, priorities and ways of living to identify interventions that are feasible, sensible and can result in desirable outcomes (contra theories of ‘change’ – theory should not dictate practice; theory and research/practice as co-substantial)
  - ◆ Local organisations funded by Northern donors recognising the normative impositions of funding, even when these are not directly visible or intentional, and seeking a diversification of funding sources (regional and in-country)

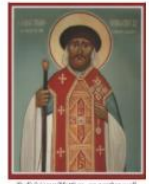
# Changing the system

- ❖ Creating direct pathways to reach and engage with communities and stakeholder groups using their spoken languages and accessible formats of knowledge production.
  - ❖ Amharic OODE website – አርቶዶክሳዊ ትምህርተ ደግማ መድረክ, which uses religious and theological language to address gender-related issues, including domestic violence, in Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox communities.
  - ❖ *Decolonial Subversions*, a multi-lingual platform publishing in written, visual and acoustic format to facilitate knowledge production from the ‘margins’ and to subvert Anglophone epistemology
- ❖ Communicating research, evidence and practical lessons directly to communities and stakeholders to circumvent the exclusionary nature of academic and international development technoscientific knowledge.
  - ❖ Project dldl/ድለድለ, a project dedicated to the development and strengthening of religio-culturally sensitive domestic violence alleviation systems in Ethiopia, Eritrea and the UK, using open access publishing, cross-cultural knowledge exchange and South-North knowledge transfer as a main strategy.





OODE - ኦርቶዶክሳዊ ትምህርተ ዶግማ መድረክ



St. Fekemariamariam, on northern wall, St. Isaac's Church, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia



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አዲስ ነገር	O.O.D.E. ምንድነው?
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ሌሎች እምነቶች (በግንባታ ላይ)	ማህበራዊ ጉዳዮች (በግንባታ ላይ)
<p><b>** ENGLISH TEXTS **</b></p> <p><b>** በእንግሊዝኛ **</b></p>	

ምንም ስንኳ አንዳንዶቻችን አማርኛ ማንበብና መጻፍ ብንችልም አብዛኞቹ የትርጉም ሥራዎች ላይ አማርኛ ተናጋሪ በሆኑ ሰዎች ድጋፍ አገኝተናል። በዚህ አጋጣሚ ኢትዮጵያውያን የነገረ መለኮት ተማሪዎችንና ምሩቃንን በትርጉም ሥራ እንዲያግዙን ለመጋበዝ እንፈልጋለን። እባክዎ በዚህ የኢሜል አድራሻ ያግኙን፡ [AmharicOODE@gmail.com](mailto:AmharicOODE@gmail.com)





# Decolonial Subversions

## Principles (as per Manifesto)

- ◆ Free accessibility worldwide in an ever-increasing number of languages, styles and modes of expression (visual, acoustic, written)
- ◆ Encourages contributors to submit their contributions in their native languages, where an English version can also be provided, or to translate contributions in English to languages pertinent to the communities of research or contributed content.
- ◆ Collaborative – consultative
- ◆ Mutually fulfilling and beneficial
- ◆ Aspired rotational editorialship model
- ◆ Bridging academia, activism and practice
- ◆ Decentred and guided by reflexivity
- ◆ Continuously revisiting and, where necessary, amending, the concept of ‘decolonisation’
- ◆ Bottom-up approach





# Building Bridges of Faith Against Domestic Violence

Project ddl/ደልደል







Thank you!

አመሰግናለሁ! የቅንዕላይ!

Contact:

[ri5@soas.ac.uk](mailto:ri5@soas.ac.uk)

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